II. VICKSBURG CAMPAIGN OVERVIEW

The central and dominating feature of the Vicksburg campaign is the mighty Mississippi River. This great waterway, which drains more than 1,234,000 square miles of the North American continent, shaped and constrained the Civil War in the West at every level—strategic, operational, and tactical. Strategically, opening the Mississippi River system to Union commerce was a key objective for the Lincoln administration and a potential death knell to Confederate aspirations of nationhood. Operationally, the river was the axis of advance and main line of communications for Union forces penetrating the Confederate heartland from north and south. By November 1862, the Confederates retained control over only the stretch of river between Vicksburg, Mississippi, and Port Hudson, Louisiana.

The Mississippi River created the terrain over which much of the Vicksburg campaign would be fought and thus influenced the tactical level of operations. The Mississippi is an "aggrading" stream, meaning that it is depositing sediments in its bed rather than eroding them away. In other words, it is building up the land, raising its own bed in the process, instead of cutting a channel down into the land. The process of sediment deposition occurs fastest at the banks where the river's waters run slowest, leading to the creation of natural levees flanking the channel. When the river rounds a bend, it tends to scour away at the outside of the bend and deposits sediment at the inside, thus moving itself laterally across the landscape. Periodically, the river breaks through its banks, seeking a shorter and lower course, where it begins again the process of building up its bed with sediments. Since the last Ice Age, when the Mississippi assumed its present configuration, the great river has wriggled back and forth across its vast floodplain, just as a rivulet of rainwater writhes upon a windowpane. It has deposited millions of tons of sediment and left a patchwork of waterways and abandoned natural levees to mark each change of its channel. Lake Providence, the Yazoo River, and the countless waterways of the "Delta" are all relics of Mississippi River channels in bygone ages (see map 1).

Periodically, the Mississippi floods, more or less inundating the entire floodplain, leaving only the tops of the levees above water and rendering temporarily navigable many of the tributaries and abandoned channels that abound in the river's proximity. Such was the case in the first quarter of 1863. Unusually heavy rains filled the

floodplain with water and kept the river well above flood stage from mid-January until early April.

In the twentieth century, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has sought to contain the Mississippi within a set of fixed banks. Before that time, however, major changes of course were a frequent occurrence. Thus it is that much of the Mississippi's 1863 riverbed is today either slack water or dry land. The river settlements of Vicksburg, Grand Gulf, and Bruinsburg have all been deserted by the channel. Owing to the intervention of man, the floodplain, as a whole, is a much drier place today than it was in 1863.

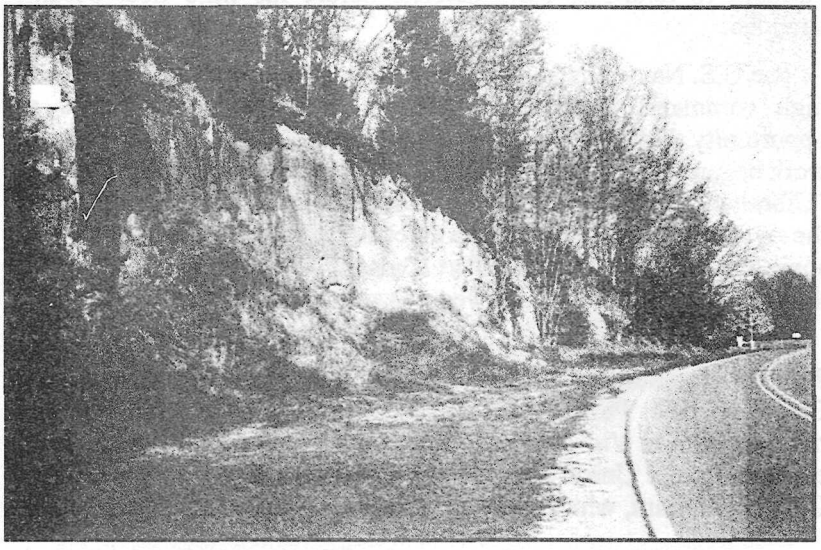
The river channel is an imposing terrain feature. Averaging in 1863 about one-half mile in width, at the hairpin turns adjacent to Vicksburg and Grand Gulf, it narrowed to one-quarter mile and ran one hundred feet deep. Water velocity at these constricted points was about six knots, making for treacherous navigation.

Although the Mississippi represented one of the great transportation arteries on the continent, access to the river from the shore and vice versa was not easy. It is true that riverboats could tie up at any of the numerous plantation landings dotting the riverbanks. However, since these habitations relied on the river for access to the outside world, roads running inland from them were few and unreliable. When the bottomlands filled with water, road travel was all but impossible on the Mississippi floodplain.

The best interfaces between roads and the river occurred wherever the river touched the eastern edge of the floodplain. Here, there stood a line of bluffs running from Kentucky to Louisiana. In 1863, the river met this bluff line at Columbus, Kentucky; Memphis, Tennessee; Vicksburg, Grand Gulf, Rodney, and Natchez in Mississippi; and Port Hudson and Baton Rouge in Louisiana. Just north of Vicksburg, the Yazoo River, a navigable tributary of the Mississippi, touches this bluff line at a place called Haynes' Bluff. Not surprisingly, each of these places figured prominently in the Mississippi River campaigns. For the Confederates, such locations were the best spots for siting artillery to command the channel, thus closing the river to Union navigation. From the Union perspective, at these sites where river met bluff, armies could offload from riverboats directly onto high, dry ground, avoiding the watery maze of the floodplain. These rare interfaces between river and bluff constituted decisive terrain in 1863.

One other important characteristic of the terrain in the Vicksburg campaign is directly attributable to the Mississippi River. At the end of the last Ice Age, when the river flowed with 10 to 100 times its present volume, it assumed the form of a "braided stream," meaning that it followed multiple channels that threaded among a vast array of islets and sandbars. Westerly winds blowing across these alluvial features raised clouds of dust out of the floodplain and deposited the sediment in a belt reaching five to fifteen miles inland from the bluff line. These yellowish-brown deposits, two hundred feet thick at Vicksburg, are known as "loess" (pronounced "luss") soil. Loess has some remarkable properties. Relatively impermeable to water, it erodes easily but is capable of holding a vertical slope. Thus, the terrain of the loess region (including Vicksburg) has been carved by erosion into a fantastic array of razorback ridges and precipitous ravines. Furthermore, being easy to dig and requiring little bracing, the loess soil of Vicksburg facilitated tunneling and fortification construction during the war.

Just as the Mississippi River formed the land it occupies, so it shaped the campaigns waged for its control during the Civil War. The struggle for the western waters began in February 1862 when Union forces captured Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, respectively. These positions outflanked Columbus, Kentucky, the Confederacy's northernmost outpost on the



Loess soil in a Vicksburg road cut, showing its ability to hold a vertical slope.

Mississippi, which was promptly evacuated. The next Confederate strongpoints downstream, New Madrid and Island Number 10, fell in April 1862 to Union Army and Navy forces under Brigadier General John Pope and Flag Officer Andrew H. Foote. Pope, together with Foote's successor, Flag Officer Charles H. Davis, secured Forts Pillow and Randolph in June. Union forces occupied Memphis shortly thereafter. The next defensible terrain downstream from Memphis was at Vicksburg.

After Memphis, the Union flotilla under Davis proceeded to reconnoiter the river to Vicksburg, where on 30 June it met Flag Officer David G. Farragut's Western Gulf Blockading Squadron. Farragut had worked upstream with his ocean-going warships following the 1 May capture of New Orleans. Thus, the U.S. Navy controlled the entire Mississippi River in the early summer of 1862—except for a short stretch of water commanded by five batteries of Confederate guns at Vicksburg.

Farragut could not stay at Vicksburg. His expedition included only 3,200 Army troops, under Brigadier General Thomas Williams—too few to assault the bluffs and silence the guns. Williams' men tried but failed to cut a canal across the peninsula opposite Vicksburg that would have bypassed the city and its guns. Falling water levels—Farragut's blue-water sloops drew up to seventeen feet—and the appearance of a Confederate ironclad, the *Arkansas*, persuaded Farragut to return to New Orleans before his little fleet became stranded.

The U.S. Navy's appearance at Vicksburg alarmed the Confederate high command. Farragut's departure gave the Confederates an opportunity that they exploited fully. Under Captain Samuel Lockett, work began on improving the fortifications of Vicksburg, making it the "Gibraltar of the West," with works facing both landward and toward the river. The Confederates also erected a similar but smaller fortress some 250 miles downriver at Port Hudson, Louisiana, thus securing to the Confederacy the river between these two points.

In October 1862, Confederate Lieutenant General John C. Pemberton assumed command of the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana. Pemberton's responsibilities included not only the river bastions at Vicksburg and Port Hudson but also the field forces confronting the Union Army of the Tennessee under Major General Ulysses S. Grant, which menaced northern Mississippi. Two flaws in

the Confederate command structure would complicate Pemberton's life. First, the western boundary of his department rested upon the largest high-speed avenue of approach in North America—the Mississippi River. He had no authority over forces on the far shore. Second, Pemberton was authorized to report directly to Richmond, bypassing General Joseph E. Johnston, overall commander between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi. When catastrophe loomed in 1863, the easily offended Johnston attempted to deny responsibility for Pemberton's situation.

Command arrangements on the Union side of the upcoming campaign appeared to be just as disordered. In mid-1862, command authority over Army contingents in the Mississippi Valley was divided between the Department of the Mississippi in the north and the Department of the Gulf in the south. In July, Major General Henry W. Halleck, commanding the Department of the Mississippi, was promoted to the position of general in chief and departed for Washington, without designating a successor. Instead, the huge department fragmented into four smaller departments, the smallest of which was Grant's Department of the Tennessee. Halleck intended to coordinate the Army commands west of the Appalachians from Washington. President Lincoln made things worse when he authorized Major General John McClernand, a prominent political general, to raise yet another force, with which McClernand promised to open the Mississippi. McClernand proceeded to assemble his "private" army at Memphis, within Grant's department.

Similarly, the two Navy components on the Mississippi operated independently of each other. Farragut and Flag Officer David D. Porter, commander of the newly designated Mississippi Squadron, both reported to the Navy Department in Washington. Needless to say, there was no joint commander on the Mississippi with the authority to direct the combined efforts of Army and Navy.

In practice, the Union command arrangement worked better than one might have expected. Porter and Grant proved to be congenial spirits who achieved through cooperation what could not be done by command. Moreover, in the course of the campaign, Halleck effectively enlarged the boundaries of Grant's small department to give him control over both banks of the Mississippi. He also directed neighboring departments to provide Grant with substantial reinforcements. Making a virtue of necessity, Grant exercised considerable latitude in his interpretation of instructions from

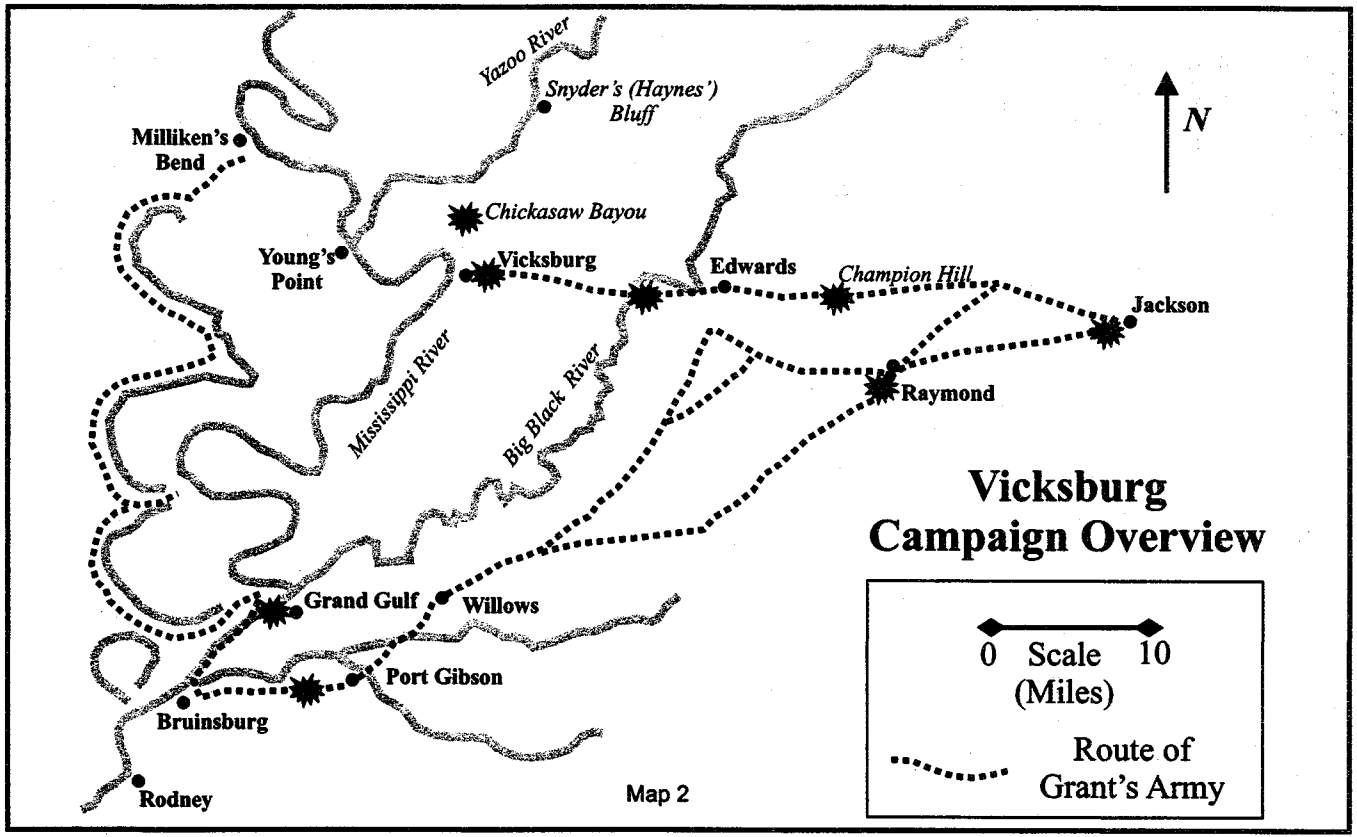
Washington. This was due in large part to his distance from the seat of power. On the Confederate side, Pemberton received plenty of advice from his superiors, but less in the way of tangible assistance.

In November 1862, Grant opened his first campaign against Mississippi. His plan involved advances on two axes, which were to converge in the Vicksburg-Jackson region. Grant led 45,000 troops southward from western Tennessee. His subordinate, Major General William T. Sherman, on his part, conducted a river-borne expedition from Memphis to the Yazoo River just above Vicksburg. Departing from the vicinity of La Grange, Tennessee, Grant's column methodically forced the Yalobusha and Tallahatchie River lines, rebuilding the Mississippi Central Railroad as it advanced. Pemberton, commanding 30,000 troops in Grant's path, seemed reluctant to give battle. On 20 December, Pemberton gained a reprieve when Confederate cavalry under Brigadier General Nathan B. Forrest and Major General Earl Van Dorn raided Grant's extended line of communications in several places. Van Dorn's destruction of the major Union advanced depot at Holly Springs, Mississippi, forced Grant to call off the overland campaign.

Sherman's river-borne expedition fared even worse. Much of his army consisted of raw recruits that he had "borrowed" from McClernand's independent command—without McClernand's knowledge. The expedition suffered a bloody repulse on 29 December at Chickasaw Bayou (see map 2).

Three days later, Sherman gave up the expedition, reembarked his troops, and returned to the Mississippi, where an irate John McClernand reclaimed his "borrowed" army. McClernand proceeded to lead an expedition up the Arkansas River that culminated in the capture of a Confederate fort at Arkansas Post on 10 January.

While contemplating further operations in the interior of Arkansas, McClernand received orders from Grant to return with his force to the Vicksburg area. McClernand disputed Grant's authority over him, but Grant had the backing of Halleck, so McClernand complied. Grant received further instructions from Halleck to combine his and McClernand's forces into one army of three corps, the corps commanders being McClernand, Sherman, and Major General James B. McPherson. (Major General Stephen A. Hurlbut commanded a fourth corps, the headquarters of which remained in Tennessee during the Vicksburg campaign.) Grant further decided that this united force


Yazoo River
Snyder's (Haynes') Bluff
Milliken's Bend
N
Chickasaw Bayou
Young's Point
Vicksburg
Edwards
Champion Hill
Jackson
Mississippi River
Big Black River
Raymond
Vicksburg Campaign Overview
Grand Gulf
Willows
0 Scale 10 (Miles)
Port Gibson
Bruinsburg
Route of Grant's Army
Rodney
Map 2

Map 2

would operate against Vicksburg by way of the river, not overland. On 30 January, Grant opened headquarters at Young's Point, Louisiana, on the west bank of the Mississippi River, just ten miles above Vicksburg.

Grant's immediate problem was to get his army out of the floodplain and on to high ground on the Vicksburg side of the river. Heavy rains and unusually high river levels kept the floodplain more or less under water from January to April, effectively precluding any sort of direct approach across the lowlands. Instead, Grant explored ways to bypass the Vicksburg fortifications by water, so as to approach the city from the land side (see map 7 in stand 4 on page 97).

The first such project was an ill-fated attempt to complete the canal, begun in 1862 and intended to cut the peninsula opposite Vicksburg. Other projects involved opening navigable routes through the web of waterways on the Mississippi floodplain. The Lake Providence expedition was an attempt to bypass Vicksburg by way of an interconnected series of lakes, bayous, and rivers west of the Mississippi. Two other expeditions, Yazoo Pass and Steele's Bayou, probed the "Delta," a swampy, low-lying region lying between the Mississippi and the Yazoo. None of these experiments succeeded. By late March, when water levels began to drop, Grant gave up on the "bayou expeditions" and decided to outflank Vicksburg on foot.

On the Confederate side, confidence rose with every Union setback. By early April, the Confederates saw indications that Grant had given up the campaign and was returning his army to Memphis. But on 9 April, Pemberton learned that strong Union forces were marching southward from the Union camps on the west bank of the Mississippi. The purpose and extent of this movement was not clear to Pemberton, but it would prove to be more than just another bayou expedition. Grant was in fact bypassing Vicksburg with his main force. McClernand's corps led the way, stepping off on 31 March, with McPherson's following, while Sherman's corps protected the base of operations above Vicksburg. The route of march followed the natural levees lining the bayous, which were once part of the Mississippi but were now well west of the river.

On the night of 16-17 April, Porter ran the batteries at Vicksburg with eight of his gunboats and three transports, furnishing Grant with the means to cross to the east bank of the Mississippi below Vicksburg. Pemberton, lulled by the slow pace of events in the preceding three

months and distracted by Union diversions elsewhere in his large department, failed to recognize the magnitude of this threat.

Pemberton's awakening came suddenly on 29 April when Porter's gunboats opened a devastating bombardment on the Confederate fortifications at Grand Gulf, the first point south of Vicksburg where the Mississippi touched the line of bluffs. McClernand's troops stood by on transports ready to land as soon as the Confederate guns fell silent. When, after five hours, the shore batteries were still firing, Grant called off the operation. The next morning, 30 April, Union troops landed unopposed twelve miles downstream from Grand Gulf at a plantation landing called Bruinsburg. By day's end, McClernand's corps had reached the top of the bluffs, placing Grant on high, dry ground on the Vicksburg side of the river with 22,000 men.

Although there were over 60,000 Confederate troops in the Department of Mississippi and East Louisiana, Pemberton could assemble only 8,000 troops in the Grand Gulf area to challenge the Union incursion. Brigadier General John S. Bowen, the commander at Grand Gulf, was at the head of his own two brigades, plus two more hurried forward from Vicksburg when he encountered McClernand's corps near Port Gibson on 1 May. For most of the day, Bowen's troops, outnumbered three to one, fought tenaciously among the razor-backed ridges and vine-choked ravines typical of the "loess hills" region. When McClernand, reinforced by elements of McPherson's corps, finally bulldozed Bowen from the battlefield, the Confederates were able to withdraw in relatively good order.

Union troops, McPherson's corps leading, occupied Port Gibson and crossed Little Bayou Pierre on 2 May, capturing a bridge over Big Bayou Pierre on 3 May. McPherson's advance outflanked the Confederate position at Grand Gulf, forcing Bowen to evacuate it. Porter's sailors promptly occupied Grand Gulf, which would serve as Grant's logistics base for the next two weeks.

His bridgehead east of the Mississippi secure, Grant paused from 3 to 9 May in the area between the Big Bayou Pierre and the Big Black River. In this interval, he evaluated his options for subsequent operations and allowed his supply train to catch up with the army. During this period, Sherman's corps joined with the main body. Sherman's arrival with two divisions gave Grant 42,000 men, with more reinforcements arriving regularly.

When Grant ordered the resumption of offensive operations, the Union axis of advance did not carry northward toward Vicksburg but rather northeastward, up the watershed between the Big Black and Bayou Pierre. Grant's objective was the railroad linking Vicksburg with Jackson (and the rest of the Confederacy). The Union force advanced on a wide front, foraging as it advanced: McClernand's corps on the left with its flank on the Big Black, Sherman's coming up in the center, and McPherson's on the right.

The Union advance met with little opposition, for Pemberton had chosen to interpret his instructions to defend Vicksburg literally. He kept two of his five divisions near the Vicksburg fortifications and put the other three to work fortifying and guarding the Big Black River near Edwards. Meanwhile, Confederate authorities began to order up reinforcements and directed General Joseph E. Johnston to take command personally in Mississippi. Johnston and the reinforcements were converging on Jackson, Mississippi, even as Grant drove northward to cut the railroad linking that place with Vicksburg.

On May 12, with McClernand's advance elements only four miles from the railroad at Edwards, McPherson's corps, on the right flank, walked into an unexpected battle at Raymond. Brigadier General John Gregg's brigade, recently arrived from Port Hudson, moved out from Jackson to attack what he thought was a small detachment but which turned out to be Logan's division of McPherson's corps. Although McPherson drove back the audacious Gregg with some difficulty, the fight at Raymond alerted Grant to the imminent appearance of Confederate reinforcements on his right flank. In a daring move, Grant suspended the advance toward Edwards, turned his back on Pemberton, and shifted his main effort to the reduction of Jackson. Sherman and McPherson captured the city on 14 May, driving out a Confederate rearguard while McClernand guarded their rear. General Johnston, who had arrived in Jackson just in time to order its evacuation, led the Confederate retreat northwards.

Thus, the Union seizure of Jackson temporarily halted the convergence of Confederate forces upon that place and bought Grant time to deal unmolested with Pemberton's force around Edwards. Meanwhile, Sherman's corps remained in Jackson to finish the demolition of industrial and transportation assets while McClernand and McPherson marched west. Pemberton, bedeviled by conflicting guidance, was ill prepared to receive the Union onslaught. His own inclinations were to stand on the defensive at the Big Black and meet

Grant in prepared positions. On 14 May, his subordinates talked him into launching an offensive southeastward against Grant's line of communications. This movement had barely begun on 15 May when peremptory orders arrived from Johnston directing Pemberton to march eastward and unite forces with him. Pemberton's command had just begun to countermarch on 16 May when Grant's forces surprised the Confederates in the vicinity of Champion Hill.

Thanks to excellent intelligence (including a plant, who delivered to the Union high command a copy of Johnston's orders to Pemberton), Grant opened the battle with 32,000 troops converging from three directions upon 23,000 Confederates. His tactical control, however, did not match the operational artistry with which he had brought on the battle. Only one of the three Union columns pressed the fight. But Pemberton's generalship was no better, and at the end of the day, his army was in full retreat toward the Big Black. One of the three Confederate divisions, moreover, failed to reach the bridges leading to safety and was lost to Pemberton; it later united with Johnston.

Grant exploited the situation ruthlessly. All three corps drew up along the Big Black on 17 May. At the railroad bridge over the river, McClernand's corps crushed a Confederate rearguard that remained on the east bank. All three corps then forced crossings at separate locations. Pemberton's command, stunned by two defeats in two days, streamed back in despair and disorder to the fortifications of Vicksburg. There, the weary troops joined the two fresh divisions that Pemberton had kept near Vicksburg throughout the campaign of maneuver.

On 18 May, Grant's army advanced on Vicksburg with McClernand's corps on the left, McPherson in the center, and Sherman on the right. Grant and Sherman personally accompanied the troops that occupied Haynes' Bluff, overlooking the Yazoo River north of town. With Haynes' Bluff in Union hands, Grant had captured the decisive terrain of the campaign—an interface between navigable water and high ground. Supplies and reinforcements could now flow to Grant's army unimpeded by either geography or Confederate action.

On 19 May, Grant mounted a hasty assault against the Vicksburg fortifications, hoping to capitalize upon the disorganization that the Confederates had displayed during their retreat. However, the "loess hills" terrain, the fortifications exploiting that terrain, and a renewed resolve within the Confederate ranks, combined to defeat the attack.

Sherman's corps bore the brunt of the fighting and the casualties. Grant returned to the attack with a full-scale push by all three corps on 22 May but suffered an even bloodier repulse. (McClernand's conduct during and after the 22 May assault contributed materially to his being relieved by Major General Edward O. C. Ord on 19 June.) Recognizing that time was on his side, Grant then commenced regular siege operations.

The siege phase of the campaign lasted six weeks. Both sides conducted siege operations in the formalized European style that had remained unchanged in its essentials for two centuries. Grant's men dug fortifications facing the Confederate works and established siege batteries to batter the Confederate strong points. Porter's gunboats and mortar scows added their fire from the river. As reinforcements flowed in from other departments, Grant extended his lines until they reached the river south of the city, thus completing the investment. Other reinforcements became part of a separate maneuver force under Sherman's command that faced the Confederate army that Johnston was assembling in the interior. Within the siege lines, Union troops dug approaches and mines but undertook no general assaults after 22 May.

Pemberton's position was a strong one, with well-conceived strong points guarding the few approaches allowed by the terrain. Although essentially cut off from resupply, Vicksburg was the main storehouse for Pemberton's department, hence supplies of food and ammunition were adequate though not plentiful. From Pemberton's point of view, he was accomplishing his mission so long as the Confederate flag flew over Vicksburg. It was up to Johnston to raise the siege from without. Johnston, however, feared the campaign was lost the moment Pemberton allowed himself to be contained within the Vicksburg fortifications. Johnston eventually managed to assemble an army of 30,000, but Union strength grew even faster. Grant finished the campaign in command of 90,000 troops (over 70,000 "present for duty"). Of this force, about two-thirds stood in the siege lines, and one-third in Sherman's maneuver force.

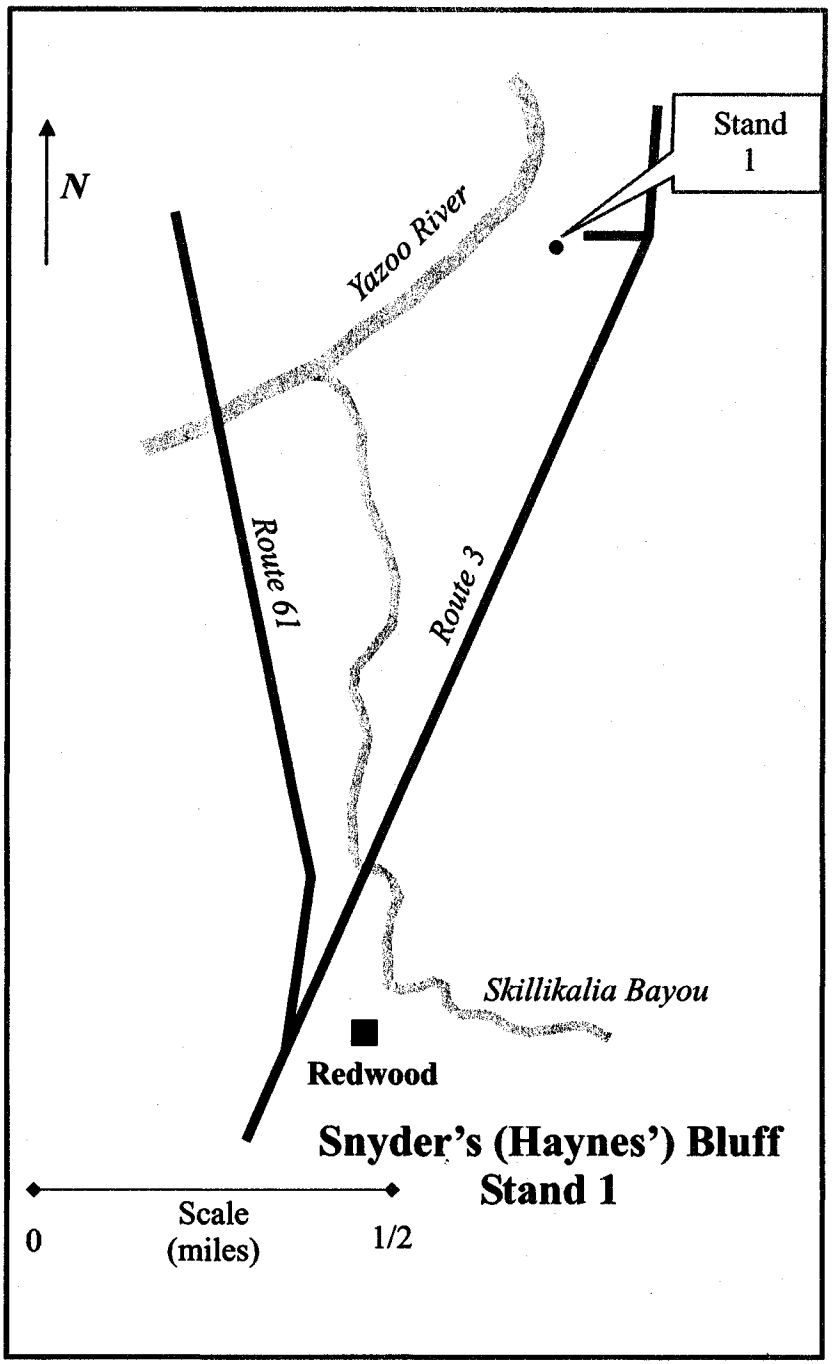
Inside Vicksburg, Johnston's failure to appear, coupled with sickness, hunger, and resurgent suspicions about Pemberton, depressed morale to the breaking point. As June gave way to July, Pemberton grew increasingly apprehensive of his troops' ability and will to fight. Believing that Grant would mount a general assault on Independence Day and doubting that his soldiers could resist,

Pemberton opened negotiations with Grant on 3 July. Grant, eager to conclude the siege before Johnston put in an appearance, and unwilling to encumber his lines of communications with 30,000 prisoners of war, agreed to parole the Vicksburg garrison. The Confederates stacked their arms on 4 July, one day after the repulse of Pickett's charge won the battle of Gettysburg for the Union. Five days later, the Confederate garrison at Port Hudson capitulated to Major General Nathaniel P. Banks, thus opening the Mississippi River to Union traffic from source to mouth.

Grant's victory at Vicksburg is generally counted as one of the decisive moments in the Civil War. Opening the Mississippi constituted a significant political victory for the Lincoln administration and was a humiliating and irretrievable setback for the Confederate cause. After Vicksburg fell, any status quo peace settlement would leave the Confederacy a bisected nation, excluded from one of the greatest transportation arteries on the continent. On an emotional level, the simultaneous defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg constituted a serious blow to Southern morale. July 1863 marks the point at which many citizens of the Confederacy despaired of winning peace on terms other than national extinction.

Militarily, the significance of Vicksburg is somewhat less pronounced. With the Mississippi secured, the city of Vicksburg proved to be an operational dead end for Grant's Army of the Tennessee. The victors suddenly found themselves on the remote periphery of the war with no significant objectives within reach. Moreover, while the damage done to the Confederate war effort was serious, it was far from decisive. Many of Pemberton's paroled troops would return to the war. Moreover, the interdiction of communications and trade with the Trans-Mississippi was not a fatal blow to Confederates on either side of the river.

Eventually, many of the combatants at Vicksburg, both Union and Confederate, would join the struggle for Chattanooga. Grant's victory there, building upon the renown he won at Vicksburg, propelled him to the position of commanding general in 1864. Grant's accession to the Army's highest command, plus the constriction of the active theater of war to the Eastern seaboard, were two of the most important legacies of the Vicksburg campaign. Vicksburg demonstrated that when "Sam" Grant set himself a goal, he would eventually attain it. The grim determination displayed by Union forces at Vicksburg was the attribute that would eventually win them the war.


N
Yazoo River
Stand
1
Route 61
Route 3
Skillikalia Bayou
Redwood
Snyder's (Haynes') Bluff
Stand 1
Scale
(miles)
0
1/2

Map 3